

The Measurement of Success

Joshua 1:1-11

How do you measure success? Is it being the best in your field? Is it winning the Superbowl? Are you successful when you own a big home, drive a nice car, and have a cushy job? Or is it having an obscene amount of money? Every year, Forbes Magazine publishes a list of billionaires in our country, and how much they are worth. As of September 2010, there were 385 billionaires in America. We haven't heard of most of them, probably because we don't run in those circles!

It's no surprise that Bill Gates of Microsoft and Warren Buffet of Berkshire Hathaway are right at the top. Bill is worth an estimated \$54 billion, while poor Warren struggles with only \$45 billion. The Walton children of Walmart fame are scraping by with about \$20 billion each. Mark Zuckerberg co-founded the social phenomenon known as "Facebook" and at age 26 is worth a paltry \$6.9 billion. Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, only has \$2 billion, while Truett Cathy of Chick-Fil-A is worth a mere \$1.6 billion.

The same magazine also publishes a list of the country's top paid entertainers. Oprah Winfrey raked in \$315 million last year, while Dr. Phil earned a measly \$80 million. Actor Jerry Seinfeld took in an estimated \$75 million, while Judge Judy eked out a living with only \$45 million.

Many people would say that all these people are successful.

Each of these gathered their millions and billions of dollars around them in various ways. Some are computer geniuses, while others are publishers, real estate brokers, shipping magnates, bankers, and of course, entertainers. Some acquired their wealth through inheritance, and others through a lot of hard work. They are considered by some to be the most successful in our society. The trouble is that if success is measured by the amount of money a person has, then there are millions more of us who will never be successful. And that can be pretty depressing.

Think carefully about the person in life who seems to have so much more than you do. They always seem to be buying more, going more, and doing more than you. And when you compare yourself with them, you don't appear to be successful, do you?

In the realm of church life, we use different standards to measure success. We look at a church with a large membership, a huge budget, a television ministry, millions invested in buildings, and we automatically assume that that church is successful. Or we hear of a church which has baptized more people than any other in its area, and we use that church's accomplishments as the standard by which we measure ourselves. It works this way: if we don't have as many in Sunday School as they do, or if we don't have the facilities they do, or if we don't baptize as many as they do, then we are not successful.

Whether in our personal lives or in our church life, we are always going to fall flat on our faces when we constantly compare ourselves to somebody else's measurement of success. There will always be someone who is doing more, has more, or accomplishes more than we. Always.

But there is an amazing thing in the book of Hebrews. In the eleventh chapter, the writer of that letter publishes his own list of the most successful people in God's kingdom, people who were in constant conflict with their cultures, some of whom died as criminals. By today's standards, these would probably be considered failures.

But God's standards of success are quite different from the world's. Luke 16:15 tells us that "*what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.*" Paul issues a warning in 1 Corinthians 3:12 that the possessions and achievements prized by the world—gold, silver, costly stones—may be considered by God to be nothing more than wood, hay or straw. We have allowed the world to impose on us false standards of success that God only laughs at, standards which are certainly not biblical.

Joshua had just received a big promotion, from being the servant of Moses, to being the leader of the entire Hebrew nation. Quite a career move, wasn't it? But just in case all that "success" was going to his head, God reminded Joshua that He measured success quite differently, and if Joshua really wanted to be successful in God's sight, then he was going to have to play by God's rules. God could see what was ahead of them in Canaan, and He wanted Joshua to have a complete understanding of what success really was.

As Joshua led the people through the Jordan River and on to conquer the land of Canaan, beginning with the city of Jericho, he never forgot the measurement of success which God had given to him just after Moses died. As long as Joshua

maintained God's perspective on what success really is, he was able to actually *be* successful.

So how do you measure success? In the world it is measured by position, power, prestige and possessions. All that fades away eventually and amounts to nothing. In the end, the only measurement of accomplishment which will really count for anything is the measurement God has established. As we look at the keys for Joshua's success in the land of Canaan, let us ask ourselves, "How can I really be successful in God's eyes?" The Scriptures give us four prerequisites for measuring success:

1 Depend on the strength of God, vv. 6-7, 9

In verse six, God told Joshua something He was to repeat several times in the very near future. He told him, "*Be strong and courageous.*" Then in verse seven: "*Be strong and very courageous.*" Again in verse nine: "*Be strong and courageous...*" In all the challenges which stretched out in front of Joshua and the Hebrew people, there would be plenty of times when they would be tempted to turn around and run back to the desert. God knew that better than Joshua, so He was preparing Joshua ahead of time.

That was all Joshua had to go on. He could not rely on his military experience, for he didn't have much. He could not depend on the genius and skill of his top advisors, for it had never been tested in battle. He had the monumental task of trying to mold these desert nomads into a unified army of soldiers, conquering a land where none of them had ever been, except Joshua and Caleb forty years before.

Joshua had to come to the point in his life—and this was it!—where he could admit that he was weak and helpless without God. Oh, he might make a go of it for a little while by himself, but in the end, Joshua would have been floundering, hopeless, and helpless. But that is the way it has always been with God's people. Before God could effectively use His people, we have had to arrive at the place where we admit that we have no one and nothing else upon which we can depend *except God.*

When Moses admitted he was too weak to do what God commanded, God used a regular walking stick to work miracles. With Samson it was a jawbone. David realized who really had the power, and God used a little stone taken from the brook to kill giant Goliath. When Jesus wished to teach His disciples that God's power is mighty, He gave them the illustration of the grain of mustard seed. When the

twelve disciples admitted to Jesus that they had no way to feed the thousands of people who had gathered to hear Jesus, then Jesus used five loaves of bread and only two fish to feed them.

You and I, to be successful by biblical standards, must also come to the place in our lives where we can admit that we are helpless without God's strength. That's not always an easy thing to do, because we are proud of personal accomplishments and abilities. There's nothing wrong with that, until we fail to depend completely on the kind of strength that can come only from the Lord. To be successful according to the world's standards requires that we be strong in other ways: that we be financially strong, that we demonstrate strength in leadership, in business acumen, or skill in athletics. But there is a strength of which the world is absolutely and totally ignorant. It is the strength which has only one source, and is not based upon health or wealth or anything else except a proper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Direct your life according to the Word of God, vv. 7-8

It was the supreme and perfect will of God that Joshua be successful in what he was about to do in Canaan. Anything less would bring disgrace and dishonor on the name of Yahweh. But God knew the dangers which awaited the Hebrews out there in the Promised Land were more than just physical dangers. There was always that constant danger that the religion and philosophies of the Canaanites and others who dwelt in the land would creep into the lives of His people. They would begin to worship false gods and be pulled away from the paths of righteousness, if they were not careful to direct their lives according to the Word God had already given them through Moses.

That's why God said to Joshua in verse seven, *"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be **successful** wherever you go."* Don't give an inch; don't compromise at all; be careful to obey every bit of it.

And then in verse eight, God told Joshua, *"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it."* Look what's next: *"**Then you will be prosperous and successful.**"* "Prosperous and successful" didn't necessarily mean that Joshua would be rich or popular, for God always uses a different measurement for success than we do. But in God's eyes, and by God's standards, Joshua would succeed if he was careful to direct his life and the life of the nation according to the Word of God.

The psalmist in Psalm 19 tells us that *“the commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.”* He says that the ordinances of the Lord *“are more precious than...pure gold”* and *“sweeter than honey...from the comb.”* Then he says, *“By them is your servant warned; in keeping them **there is great reward.**”* But it is so easy for us to lose the sense of direction in our lives, especially when there are so many false gods and Canaanites out there. We are too prone and susceptible to being influenced and pulled away from God. Just like Joshua, and just like the Hebrew people, we must direct our lives according to what God has already told us in His Word. Success cannot come any other way.

Another group of God’s people once tried to do things their own way, without directing their lives by the Word of God, and they failed miserably. This is what God said to them, and what He says to us who think we can forge our own way without giving heed to the principles He has set forth in His Word: *“I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea”* (Isaiah 48:17b-18).

The psalmist had learned there was a better way: *“Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight...Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me”* (Psalm 119:35, 133).

Unless and until we find direction for our lives from the Word of God, we are headed down a road that goes nowhere. As sinful as we are, we can know true success in our lives when we direct our lives according to the Word of God.

3 Discover the leadership of God, vv. 5, 9

There is one thing we need to pay very close attention to in this story of Joshua, something which is true in our lives, as well. God didn’t just give Joshua the command to conquer and possess Canaan, and then send him off with a pat on the back and a cheerful wave of the hand. That would never have worked then, and it will never work now. That’s why God gave Joshua the beautiful assurance that He was going to be with Joshua—**forever!** In verse five, God said, *“No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; **I will never leave you or forsake you.**”*

That was quite an announcement! It was a discovery which would revolutionize the way Joshua led the people. He wasn’t doing this on his own, and would never have to do it on his own, because God had promised His constant and abiding

presence. In fact, God repeated this promise in verse nine in these precious words: *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”*

What a discovery! It was one thing to depend on the strength of God, and it was great to be able to direct his life by God’s Word. But this was even better! As they entered Canaan, and as they approached their enemies in battle, they were empowered by the leadership of God. Being successful according to biblical standards carries the prerequisite that we make the discovery of the way God has promised to lead and accompany those who follow with all their hearts.

For example, God spoke through Isaiah, saying, *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze”* (Isaiah 43:2).

And because we, too, need to make the discovery of God’s leadership and presence in our lives as we go out to conquer our Canaan today, Jesus left a promise for us: *“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”* (Matthew 18:20). And again, *“And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20b).

Becoming successful in God’s eyes requires more than the things the world depends on for success. God thumbs His nose at those things. The person who is successful in all he does for God is the person who has made the rich and life-changing discovery of God’s leadership and presence in his life. You, too, can make that discovery today.

4 Do the commands of God, vv. 2, 10-11

Back up in verse two, God had said to Joshua, *“Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them.”* Most of us would have hesitated, because at that time of year the Jordan River was at flood stage, as we learn in 3:15. How would we ever cross that swollen river? How could we, without modern machinery and equipment, construct a bridge strong enough to support all those people and livestock?

Or, if we believed God enough to obey, we might take the approach of calling together a committee to study the problem, and make recommendations to the rest of us as to the best place to cross the Jordan, what kind of bridge would be best,

what kind of materials should be used in building it, and who could do it the cheapest and fastest. The long and short of it would be that no matter what we said, and no matter the religious activity in which we might be involved, we would not actually obey God until we had settled it in our minds and in our pocketbooks that we could actually do it without too much of a challenge, and without too much inconvenience!

But look at Joshua! Here was a man who was successful in God's eyes, so let's examine him closely. The command was given in verse two. In verses 10-11, as soon as God finished speaking to him, Joshua went right to work obeying, doing exactly what God told him to do. God didn't outline for Joshua exactly where he was to cross the Jordan, and didn't at that time tell him anything about how they were going to be able to cross the Jordan. But Joshua obeyed just the same.

In verses ten and eleven, Joshua passes the commands of God on to the people. He was saying to them, "Here we are at the very brink of possessing what God has given us! Let's get ready for it. In three days we are going to cross the Jordan to go in and take possession of the land." And there's the key to being successful according to biblical standards, rather than the standards of the world. Sometimes we have to act upon nothing more than sheer faith that God is going to do what He said He would do. Sometimes we just have to obey him.

It would have been easy for Joshua to delay. They waited forty years; what difference would a few more years make? Yet we know this from our own personal experience: the longer we delay in obeying God, the less likely we are to comply with the requirements God sets forth. ***Delay is disobedience!***

We know the things we are to do. Our very delay in doing the commands of God for our lives is nothing but disobedience. When God commands us to do any particular thing, from tithing to praying to worshiping to witnessing to reaching out to those in distress to being more than conquerors through Jesus Christ, and we put off actually doing what God commands, we are disobeying. And we cannot be successful in God's eyes as long as we disobey Him. It is nothing but hypocrisy of the worst sort for me to tell myself that I am willing to obey God, while I put off obeying God.

Joshua believed God and acted instantly. Believing God in our time requires our instant and constant obedience. Anything less than that will rob us of success in God's eyes to do or be all He commands.

You may never be on the list of the richest individuals in America. You may never be respected and looked up to by people in the world because of your so-called “success” as the world measures success. But God uses a different standard to measure success. It’s not what you own, or who you know, or where you’ve been. It is possible to be successful and have those things or accomplishments, but those things do not make you successful.

If you desire to be successful in God’s eyes, pay attention to what God told Joshua, because that is exactly what He tells us today:

***Depend on the strength of God
Direct your life by the Word of God
Discover the leadership of God
Do the commands of God***

Canaan is stretched out before you. Will you go in?

Canaan is stretched out before our church. Will we go in?

*10.26.1986, AM—Clarksdale Baptist Church, Clarksdale, Mississippi
01.19.1992, AM—Hillcrest Baptist Church, Jackson, Mississippi
01.17.1999, AM—Bethlehem Baptist Church, Benton, Mississippi
02.20.2011, AM—Utica Baptist Church, Utica, Mississippi*